

## 22 ❖ Ella Fitzgerald (Joy)

When Ella Fitzgerald was singing at her peak—in good voice, with good song, arrangement, and accompaniment—nothing in life was more splendid. An evangelist of swing, she inspired devotion that bordered on blind and elated trust. Like other performing artists safely ensconced in the pantheon, she offered the illusion of perfection in a context of free-ranging individuality. We defer to that illusion in part because the failings of such performers remind us that in art, unlike the rest of life, our accomplishments ultimately abrogate our shortcomings. She was the finger-snapping oracle who envisioned all of humanity “trucking on down the avenue/without a single thing to do.” One of a handful of preeminent jazz performers who were held tight to the public’s bosom, Ella Fitzgerald taught us something vital about joy, as Billie Holiday taught us something vital about pain. Each was possessed of a certainty.

Fitzgerald’s long career was rich in paradox. Her pop and songbook records notwithstanding, she was determinedly a jazz singer, yet could not sing the blues, tending to embroider them into a numb banality. An irreproachable connoisseur of ballads, she had little talent for histrionics. A product of the swing era, which served up her biggest hit, she soared to far greater celebrity with bebop-inflected scat singing. She was a black singer who named the white Connee Boswell as her primary model. She was a respectful interpreter of pop songs, who could caress them with sensual dedication, and an inspired embellisher, who could deconstruct them as though the lyrics had no more meaning than nonsense syllables. She did not make hit records, but worked exclusively in the world’s great concert halls. Exceedingly shy off-stage, she was bold to the point of impudence in the rapture of music. Large-boned and plain-looking, she personified a jazzy glamour—showbiz royalty, the unassailable First Lady of Song.

In the beginning, no one would have thought to characterize her as a lady, first or otherwise. Ella was too much the lively young girl, precocious but vulnerable, looking for a little yellow basket. “A-Tisket, A-Tasket,” which she developed from a children’s song and recorded with Chick Webb in 1938, remained unaccountably the best-selling disc of her career. Her ability to survive that early success is significant; most big band singers who owed their popularity to novelty songs did not. Fitzgerald’s story has been told often, if elliptically—considering her fame,

one marvels at how assiduously she protected her privacy. She was born in Newport News, Virginia, in or around 1918, and taken to an orphanage in Yonkers, New York, after the death of her mother in the early ‘30s. In 1934, Benny Carter heard her at an amateur contest at Harlem’s Apollo Theater and recommended her to several influential men in the music business, including Fletcher Henderson and John Hammond, who were unimpressed. The dwarfed drummer and bandleader Chick Webb agreed to audition her and was bowled over. He became Ella’s legal guardian even as he reorganized his trailblazing orchestra around her unfledged teenage voice. At Webb’s death, a year after “A-Tisket, A-Tasket,” Fitzgerald affirmed her loyalty by fronting the orchestra for two years before beginning her career as a single.

Like her mentor, Ella signed with Decca Records, where she made more than 300 sides (about 40 of them as vocalist with the Webb orchestra). Except for a couple of sessions with Teddy Wilson and Benny Goodman, all the records she made between 1935 and 1955 were for Decca, an indentureship rivaling that of the company’s main attraction, Bing Crosby. The first half of her career was as much a reflection of the aesthetics of Jack Kapp, who created the label and believed that the middle of the road was where all music should converge, as it was of her extraordinary rapport with the musical fashions of the Depression and war years. Though she would achieve her greatest renown in the affluent society of the ‘50s, Ella was made for the era of Little Orphan Annie.

Despite Fitzgerald’s emphatic rhythmic genius, Kapp appears to have been at loose ends at how to market her, and many of the Deccas are egregiously meretricious, prefiguring her exploitation albums of the late ‘60s and after (for example, Ella sings country, Ella sings the Beatles). Fitzgerald’s sessions were too often burdened with contemptible material and intrusive vocal choirs, though she excelled at Decca’s unique penchant for duets. Kapp encouraged a policy in which his artists would appear on recordings together, integrating jazz and pop, and generating encounters as inspired as Louis Armstrong and the Mills Brothers and as contrived as Bing Crosby and Jascha Heifetz. Like Crosby, Ella was amenable, productive, and flexible—the challenge of working with artists she admired stimulated her reflexes. But her career became mired in the enforced versatility.

It’s tempting to speculate about the kind of records Ella might have made for Columbia in those years, when John Hammond’s policy was to present Billie Holiday in small instrumental groups made up of the most gifted swing musicians in town, usually under the leadership of Teddy Wilson. Early in 1936, she did record two sides with Wilson. “All My Life” is a pleasantly nostalgic ballad, enunciated with a clarity

worthy of Ethel Waters, though the sensibility is relatively naive. "My Melancholy Baby" swings steadily on the beat and is enhanced by good-natured embellishments. Whereas Holiday personalized a song by inflecting every phrase, Fitzgerald conveyed a purer approach, less idiosyncratic and sometimes less discerning. Benny Goodman was so impressed with her that he used her as a replacement for Helen Ward in June of the same year. She gave "Goodnight My Love" a well-phrased but stuffy reading, yet "Take Another Guess" unveiled the girlishly swinging Ella, though her vocal projection was thick and clouded, not yet fully formed. In those years, she accented long-vowel sounds with increased vibrato and broke words into staccato syllables to stress rhythmic impact. She put more faith in melody and rhythm than in lyrics.

By the end of 1936, she was emerging as a kind of swing mascot, singing many tunes with the words "swing" or "swinging" in the title. One of them, "Organ Grinder's Swing," was made at the first session under her own name—accompanied by a contingent from the Webb band, the Savoy Eight—and proved to be prophetic. It was a childhood novelty and it led to several others, including "Betcha Nickel," "Chew-Chew-Chew," and, of course, "A-Tisket A-Tasket." Of greater importance, it showed her off for the first time as an aggressively deft scat singer. In the final chorus, riffing the phrase, "Oh, organ," she outpaced the band. For her third session, Decca teamed her with the Mills Brothers, an indication of the label's confidence in her growing success. She was not yet twenty.

Her voice matured greatly during the next couple of years, though her naive, on-the-beat determination abided. More often than not, the material was pitifully weak, but if Fitzgerald could not transcend it as Holiday effortlessly did, she could uplift it with her expressive, trumpet-like delivery—for example, "If You Should Ever Leave" or "Dipsy Doodle." On the last, she sounds entirely oblivious to the song's abysmal words. She could raise temperatures on a worthy swinger like Irving Berlin's "Pack Up Your Sins and Go to the Devil" or fashionable band numbers like "If Dreams Come True" and "Rock It for Me," but also betrayed an awkwardness in those years, a bumptious quality exacerbated by the dire novelties that threatened to become her trademark.

The sensual lilt in her voice became more pronounced in 1939 in such memorable readings as "Don't Worry About Me" and "If I Didn't Care." With "Stairway to the Stars," her characteristic approach to ballads was codified: the first chorus was reasonably straight, the second was an exercise in swing time as she transfigured the key melody into a contagiously rocking riff. Yet her improvisations were often predictable; you

can get a fair idea of how much she grew by comparing "Stairway" with "Soon," recorded in 1950. Once again, a forthright chorus is followed by a rhythmic one, but the voice has flowered into the very embodiment of swing phrasing, luscious and fluid.

The '40s were undoubtedly the period of Fitzgerald's most uneven recordings, a reflection of an in-between dilemma that defined the era. Swing was losing its magic, and bop was little more than an underground workshop. Decca coupled her with the label's other black artists: Louis Armstrong, Louis Jordan, the Ink Spots, the Delta Rhythm Boys, Sy Oliver, Bill Doggett, the Mills Brothers (again), and others. These accounted for some of her most successful records of the decade, musically and commercially, especially as compared with the numerous ballads she sang in collusion with lumbering studio orchestras and vocal choirs directed by Gordon Jenkins. Frequently, she overcomes the overblown settings, but the dim arrangements irrevocably date the recordings. Ella's thick delivery had now metamorphosed into a light and pristine style, fully at home in the greater spaciousness of her range. But too often her own superficiality matched the material and made her sound like a brilliantly equipped hack.

Yet a new Fitzgerald was emerging—the queen of scat, the first lady of song. Her 1945 "Flying Home" was an all-scat performance that established her among jazz modernists. She wasn't born of bop, like Sarah Vaughan, but she was thoroughly accepted into the fold. With her ear and technique, Ella was not likely to be intimidated by a flatted fifth; on the contrary, she was now in her twenties, and the new sounds of Charlie Parker and Dizzy Gillespie were a welcome source of inspiration. She thrived on it, roaring through a lexicon of bop licks on "Lady Be Good," which became one of her most requested and enduring showpieces, and on the more imaginative "How High the Moon," where she followed a straight chorus with a variation compiled equally of phrases from swing and bop.

Fitzgerald's ballads, too, reflected her enhanced improvisational powers. She revealed a knack for altering the character of a dull phrase by raising a key note by the interval of a sixth. She continued to develop her mastery of portamento, with which she would rise or fall to the proper note or, more intriguingly, begin with the written note and slide into a more colorful interval. She meshed beautifully with the Mills Brothers on a serene and enticing "I Gotta Have My Baby Back"; displayed wonderfully airy high notes on "I've Got the World on a String"; exhibited an incomparable and unexpected richness of voice on the Martha Raye novelty, "You'll Have To Swing It." Given the fullness of her recording schedule, Fitzgerald could be drearily impersonal even with

attractive material (as on "I Wished on the Moon," 1954), but when she was committed to a song ("It Might as Well Be Spring," 1955), she was luminous.

The culmination of Fitzgerald's two-decade association with Decca quietly appeared in the form of twenty selections with pianist Ellis Larkins (eight Gershwin titles in 1950 and a mixed bag in 1954). Never before had she achieved and sustained the sensuousness of the first encounter with Larkins, producing what was essentially her first songbook. Never had those familiar Gershwin melodies and Gershwin words taken on so voluptuous a glow. Her command of the material, measure by measure, is enthralling, and if those matchless readings of "Soon," "Someone to Watch Over Me," "I've Got a Crush on You," and "How Long Has This Been Going On?" point the way to her future, they also define a pinnacle of achievement in that quickly fading vocal style born of the big bands.

The gloried monument of popular song that Fitzgerald personified after she signed with Norman Granz's Verve Records coincided with the rise of TV and hi-fi, both of which she conquered. Along with Frank Sinatra, another reconstituted big band singer who had survived his own hell of constricting ballads and demeaning curios, she found her true recording medium in the long-playing album. At the peak of her success in the '50s, her new label didn't even try to invade the singles market. Fitzgerald was a concert and festival artist, and there was something *déclassé*, something smaller than life, about jukebox fodder. And Ella was nothing if not outsized and thoroughly liberated, whether shaking up Germany in her blond wig or wailing with the boys at Jazz at the Philharmonic. When, during her hair-raising 1957 concert recording of "Lady Be Good," she begins to riff, "I want to rock/I want to roll," she isn't just acknowledging the fad many of her contemporaries assumed or hoped would disappear with the new year, but making common cause with the latest wrinkle in a rhythmic fabric that underpinned her entire aesthetic. She was now unstoppable, the soul of swing, her rhythmic panache indemnifying her against cliché.

Still, her ballad singing, girded however subtly by rhythmic cunning, exhibited the fullest measure of her accomplishment. In ballads, we could best experience the luxuriousness of her instrument, its warmth and generosity and range—her technical resources, which were extravagant. In command of nearly three octaves, she was a mezzo-soprano with the auxiliary assets of a contralto who additionally displayed an unembarrassed appetite for falsetto and an arsenal of buzzes and growls. (She was one of Louis Armstrong's most astute impersonators.) Yet it was

never Fitzgerald's reach that won our hearts, but the emotional energy that directed her musical choices, an energy that will seem wanting only to those who consider joy less rewarding than woe.

For there is no denying Fitzgerald's limitations as an interpreter of songs that express complicated attitudes of sorrow and regret. She had her share of troubles, but in music she was free of them. Her stilted performance in *Pete Kelly's Blues* indicated an inability to step into any character other than her own, though when she sang in that movie one was quick to overlook her line readings. For all the beauty of her Gershwin renditions, she could not match Armstrong's powerful sensitivity when they teamed in *Porgy and Bess*. Louis and Ella enjoyed a productive musical relationship that peaked with their 1957 duets, a discourse on timbre and texture by turns epic ("Autumn in New York" has the interaction of a one-act play) and uproarious ("Stompin' at the Savoy" has the reciprocity of an inside joke). She could match and even trump his every rhythmic jolt, but the role of Bess underscored her dramatic limitations, as did her unhappy attempts at blues singing, where she often masked the idiom's candor in distracting ornamentation.

The true Ella was upbeat or serene or both (what a shame she never recorded an album with Erroll Garner). This was true even of her most penetrating ballads: they are wistful, but rarely distraught. Her "Someone To Watch Over Me" is radiant, but her "Lush Life" is glibly inattentive. She brought a heady commitment to songs that speak of pleasure, but she was not a singer to cry over her absinthe.

The modern American song, as opposed to the European style, inhabits the lower registers. Except for Verdi, the baritone's friend, opera venerates the higher range and allocates supporting roles to altos, baritones, and basses. Even if you've never heard opera, you have heard of a handful of tenors and sopranos: Caruso and Pavarotti, Callas and Price. In American pop and jazz, the baritone has ruled since the mid-'20s when Bing Crosby sang with Paul Whiteman and was celebrated for his virility and naturalness. The tenors he displaced were soon considered effete and affected. The rare exceptions proved the rule: Louis Armstrong began as a tenor, but his leonine growl subsumed the issue; Jimmy Rushing brought operatic fervor to the blues; Tony Bennett once confessed to singer Mary Cleere Haran (with a smile), "I'm a tenor trying to be a baritone."

Our stellar women singers have also sung from deep in the chest (a quality especially strong in Connee Boswell, Ella's first influence) and carried that same earthy resonance into the higher notes, making up in rhythmic and intonational continuity what is lost in purity of voice. Sar-

ah Vaughan, perhaps the most brilliantly equipped of American vocalists, was often referred to as operatic because of her comprehensive range (more than four octaves), but there was nothing operatic in her articulation, which took much of its impetus from the lusty trombone-cello timbre of her lower notes.

Fioritura doesn't exist in American vernacular singing, but melisma does, with its aching, breathless, rumbling blues notes and arching howls. American ornamentation isn't used for the sake of virtuosity alone, but as an expressive device of walloping immediacy. Surely one reason Ella Fitzgerald was celebrated as the first lady of song for half a century (this was no king-of-swing gimmick) is that she so thoroughly embodied the American style. Some observers were disarmed by her seemingly guileless technique, which perhaps they associated with her "girlish" quality. Frank Sinatra, our man in *bel canto*, once expressed reservations about her phrasing. You can hear her breathe, he complained. Of course you can. Her breathing is the mechanism that incites her interpretations. For Sinatra, the lyric governs the melodic line; Fitzgerald put her money on rhythm. Sinatra would have us forget the body that houses the voice; Ella reminds us of the body's function.

Nowhere is the totality of her spell more apparent than in the remarkable song books. Verve collected them as *The Complete Ella Fitzgerald Song Books*: a cloth-covered red box with a matching 120-page book and all eight volumes (sixteen discs in their original garb, but miniaturized). They have done for Ella what Oxford did for the *Oxford English Dictionary*, only without the requisite magnifying glass, producing a kind of musical Limoges box, its tiny wonders to be examined with bemused astonishment.

Armstrong and Crosby and Astaire and Holiday and Sinatra each had an incalculable impact on the canon of modern song. But Fitzgerald erected the pantheon. After Norman Granz pried her out of her Decca contract, they went to work on a quite lavish examination of the great songwriters, one of the boldest achievements of the LP era. The first honoree was Cole Porter, whose stock consequently soared, even as his talent and the world that produced it began to disappear. As an example of the series' impact, consider that Irving Berlin requested inclusion after the Rodgers and Hart collection was issued. As an example of its prescience, consider how close the series' canonization is to that of Alec Wilder and James T. Maher in the 1972 *American Popular Song*.

Those who insist that Fitzgerald failed to make the most of sophisticated lyrics should go back to the Porter set: no one has done better by the upper-crust mockery and minor-key irony of those songs—certainly

not Mabel Mercer, who embraced many of the affectations. When the eight collections were recorded, between 1956 and 1964, singers frequently updated lyrics and altered pronouns to suit the performer's gender. The one mistep in the venture is Fitzgerald's cursory gloss on Larry Hart's "Manhattan," the lyric that made him famous. Her updated verse, "And *My Fair Lady* is a terrific show they say," simply can't compare with the tart reference in the original to *Abie's Irish Rose* (an expressed hope that "our future babies" will see it close), and she omits other classic rhymes ("Greenwich"/"men itch") as well.

Yet throughout the Rodgers and Hart volume, Fitzgerald affirms Hart's preeminence among lyricists even as she mines for all they are worth the ingeniously jazzy, endlessly appealing melodies Rodgers had in him before he tailored his art to the ponderous musings of Oscar Hammerstein II. Hart brought out his soul, and does the same for singers. An alcoholic, depressive, four-foot-eleven, Jewish homosexual who died at forty-seven, thinking *Oklahoma!* was the promised land, Hart always avoided the obvious. He wrote love songs for people who didn't expect to be loved, like "My Funny Valentine": "Is your figure less than Greek/Is your mouth a little weak/When you open it to speak/Are you smart?" Don't answer, just be mine. Fitzgerald understands Hart wonderfully well, knows, or appears to know, about "ordering orange juice for one," love with and without "dizzy spells," and the blessed absence of people ("Who needs people?"). She makes the most of the "Little Girl Blue" who is as "merry as a Carousel" and doesn't flinch from the chill observation of her adulthood that "all you can count on is the raindrops/that fall on Little Girl Blue." She's as understanding of the desperation in "Ten Cents a Dance" as she is of the pleasures of "Mountain Greenery."

She reaches even greater heights on the overwhelming five-volume set devoted to the Gershwins. Nelson Riddle did some of his finest work in that set. Duke Ellington, on the other hand, took it easy, arriving at his self-homage with little music other than a suite in honor of the singer. Somehow the alchemists worked magic, combining vocals and instrumentals, and producing a high-water mark for them both. Of recently excavated performances integrated into these discs, the most rewarding is a ten-minute rehearsal of Billy Strayhorn's "Chelsea Bridge," a fly-on-the-wall revelation of how Ellington manipulated his men. The other pantheon composers are Berlin, Harold Arlen, Jerome Kern, and Johnny Mercer, who is the subject of a high-intensity swing session with exuberant writing by Riddle.

Time and again in these and other exemplary performances, Ella Fitzgerald does something so reflexively inventive or poignant, so casually

insightful, that you want to stop the disc and marvel in silence. Elsewhere, the ebulliance takes over and you can hardly believe your luck—to live in the world of Ella. It is to laugh out loud.

## 23 ❖ Artie Shaw (*Cinderella's Last Stand*)

Few reissues in the '90s proved more satisfying or revealing than Artie Shaw's *The Last Recordings*, released in January of 1992, followed a year later by *More Last Recordings*. It did not much matter that the packaging is a bit misguided. In addition to the title, the cover of the double-CD box barks "Rare & Unreleased" and "Collector's Edition." All three phrases miss the point. The recordings are among Shaw's last, not all—as the second volume demonstrated. As best I can tell (the liner information is obscure), only three of twenty pieces, including alternate takes, were previously unreleased, though the entire set is so rare that the point is hardly worth contesting. I don't know what "Collector's Edition" means, but the appeal to aficionados or completists is disheartening. For these are among the finest performances by one of the eminent clarinetists of the century, and among the most enchanting small band recordings in jazz history, virtually unrivaled in defining the nexus between swing and bop. That they were new to almost everyone heightened their wonder.

Shaw, born in 1910, stopped playing in 1954 after recording at his own expense the last editions of his Gramercy Five (really a sextet if you include Shaw) at a series of late night or early morning sessions (beginning after the band finished at the Embers about 4 A.M. and continuing until noon). He had walked away from his career, his music, his celebrity on a few occasions in the years since 1938, when his hit version of "Begin the Beguine" threatened to transform him from an introspective, adventurous, irreverent musician into a celebrity on autopilot—little better, in his unforgiving view, than a trained seal. But in 1954, he put down his clarinet for good, and it has been impossible to discuss his art without arguing his sullen individuality. Other musicians have quit performing while continuing to record (Glenn Gould) or managed to sustain a following while producing abstruse suites and tone poems (Duke Ellington). What is most paradoxical about Shaw, as quickly revealed in conversation with him, is his resentment of celebrity obligations and his

desire to sustain a celebrity-sized following. Best take him at his word when he insists that he was temperamentally unsuited to the whole star-making apparatus.

Still, the mystery gnaws at those of us who haven't the holy gift: If you do something better than almost anyone else alive, how do you walk away from it? Shaw has been asked the question so many times that he's exasperated at having to go over old ground, yet the fact that he invariably comes up with different anecdotal ammunition to explain his decision helps keep the mystery alive. Visiting Shaw in 1990, I was given a couple of reasons for his abdication that I hadn't heard before. In 1949, the worst year in history to assemble a large orchestra (Ellington was scuffling, Herman and Basie gave it up), Shaw organized his most ambitious pure-blooded jazz orchestra: arrangers included Tadd Dameron, George Russell, Johnny Mandel, and Gene Roland; players included Al Cohn, Zoot Sims, Danny Bank, and Jimmy Raney. (Musicmasters, which issued *The Last Recordings*, has collected the marvelous proof in 1949.) Here's one recollection of the moment he decided to walk:

If that band had kept going, it probably would have been *the* band, but I had to break it up in three weeks, there was no point. Then I went out and put together what they wanted, a 1938 band and, this is a true story, it was highly successful. And I thought to myself, 'Well, if they hated the best band I've got and they like a band I finished with eleven years ago, which is a generation in jazz, let's see what happens—my own private joke—with the worst band that ever was.' So I put together a stock arrangement band. We played the top ten tunes on *Billboard's* chart, one to ten—'If I Knew You Were Coming I'd Have Baked a Cake,' 'Blue Tango,' 'Hoop-Dee-Doo,' whatever they were. They *loved* that band. The last night I ever had a big band, we played in Pennsylvania, Allentown or Reading—a dance at a little American Legion joint. And after it was over, the last night—you couldn't make this up, it's like [Jimmy] Swaggert and his whore going, of all places, to Babylon—I finished the gig and a guy came up to me and said, 'Mr. Shaw, I heard you were a tough guy to get along with, but I want to tell you something. It's the best night we've had since Blue Barron.'

So help me God. I said "Thanks," and I was through with the music business. When the guy said, 'Blue Barron,' when those words came out, I knew it was over. The next time I ever played again, I had the small group.

The small group was formed for an engagement in New York at the Embers in 1953, and in a sense it represented compensation for every